SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES

IN RE JESSIE McDONALD, PETITIONER

ON MOTION FOR LEAVE TO PROCEED IN FORMA PAUPERIS

No. 88–5890. Decided February 21, 1989

JUSTICE BRENNAN, with whom JUSTICE MARSHALL, JUSTICE BLACKMUN, and JUSTICE STEVENS join, dissenting.

In the first such act in its almost 200-year history, the Court today bars its door to a litigant prospectively. Jessie McDonald may well have abused his right to file petitions in this Court without payment of the docketing fee; the Court's order documents that fact. I do not agree, however, that he poses such a threat to the orderly administration of justice that we should embark on the unprecedented and dangerous course the Court charts today.

The Court's denial not just of McDonald's present petition but also of his right to file for extraordinary writs *in forma pauperis* in the future is, first of all, of questionable legality. The federal courts are authorized by 28 U. S. C. § 1915 to permit filings *in forma pauperis*. The statute is written permissively, but it establishes a comprehensive scheme for the administration of *in forma pauperis* filings. Nothing in it suggests we have any authority to accept *in forma pauperis* pleadings from some litigants but not from others on the basis of how many times they have previously sought our review. Indeed, if anything, the statutory language forecloses the action the Court takes today. Section 1915(d) explains the circumstances in which an *in forma pauperis* pleading may be dismissed as follows: a court "may dismiss *the case* if the allegation of poverty is untrue, or if satisfied that the action is frivolous or malicious" (emphasis added). This language suggests an individualized assessment of frivolousness or maliciousness that the Court's prospective order precludes. As one lower court has put it, a court's discretion to dismiss *in forma pauperis* cases summarily "is limited . . . in

every case by the language of the statute itself which restricts its application to complaints *found to be* frivolous or malicious." *Sills* v. *Bureau of Prisons*, 245 U. S. App. D. C. 389, 391, 761 F. 2d 792, 794 (1985) (emphasis added). Needless to say, the future petitions McDonald is barred from filing have not been "found to be" frivolous. Even a very strong and well-founded belief that McDonald's future filings will be frivolous cannot render a before-the-fact disposition compatible with the individualized determination § 1915 contemplates.

This Court's Rule 46 governs our practice in cases filed *in forma pauperis*. No more than § 1915 does it grant us authority to disqualify a litigant from future use of *in forma pauperis* status. Indeed, Rule 46.4 would seem to forbid such a practice, for it specifies that when the filing requirements described by Rule 46 are complied with, the Clerk "will file" the litigant's papers "and place the case on the docket." Today we order the Clerk to refuse to do just that. Of course we are free to amend our own rules should we see the need to do so, but until we do we are bound by them.

Even if the legality of our action in ordering the Clerk to refuse future petitions for extraordinary writs *in forma pauperis* from this litigant were beyond doubt, I would still oppose it as unwise, potentially dangerous, and a departure from the traditional principle that the door to this courthouse is open to all.

The Court's order purports to be motivated by this litigant's disproportionate consumption of the Court's time and resources. Yet if his filings are truly as repetitious as it appears, it hardly takes much time to identify them as such. I find it difficult to see how the amount of time and resources required to deal properly with McDonald's petitions could be so great as to justify the step we now take. Indeed, the time that has been consumed in the preparation of the present order barring the door to Mr. McDonald far exceeds that which would have been necessary to process his petitions for

the next several years at least. I continue to find puzzling the Court's fervor in ensuring that rights granted to the poor are not abused, even when so doing actually *increases* the drain on our limited resources. *Cf. Brown* v. *Herald Co.*, 464 U. S. 928 (1983) (BRENNAN, J., dissenting). Today's order makes sense as an efficiency measure only if it is merely the prelude to similar orders in regard to other litigants, or perhaps to a generalized rule limiting the number of petitions *in forma pauperis* an individual may file. Therein lies its danger.

The Court's order itself seems to indicate that further measures, at least in regard to this litigant, may be forthcoming in the future. It notes that McDonald remains free to file *in forma pauperis* for relief other than extraordinary writs, if he "does not similarly abuse that privilege." *Ante*, at 6. But if we have found his 22 petitions for extraordinary writs abusive, how long will it be until we conclude that his *32* petitions for certiorari are similarly abusive and bar that door to him as well? I am at a loss to say why, logically, the Court's order is limited to extraordinary writs, and I can only conclude that this order will serve as precedent for similar actions in the future, both as to this litigant and to others.

I doubt—although I am not certain—that any of the petitions Jessie McDonald is now prevented from filing would ultimately have been found meritorious. I am most concerned, however, that if, as I fear, we continue on the course we chart today, we will end by closing our doors to a litigant with a meritorious claim. It is rare, but it does happen on occasion that we grant review and even decide in favor of a litigant who previously had presented multiple unsuccessful petitions on the same issue. See, *e. g.*, *Chessman* v. *Teets*, 354 U. S. 156 (1957); *see id.*, at 173–177 (Douglas, J., dissenting).

This Court annually receives hundreds of petitions, most but not all of them filed *in forma pauperis*, which raise no colorable legal claim whatever, much less a question worthy

of the Court's review. Many come from individuals whose mental or emotional stability appears questionable. It does not take us long to identify these petitions as frivolous and to reject them. A certain expenditure of resources is required, but it is not great in relation to our work as a whole. To rid itself of a small portion of this annoyance, the Court now needlessly departs from its generous tradition and improvidently sets sail on a journey whose landing point is uncertain. We have long boasted that our door is open to all. We can no longer.

For the reasons stated in *Brown* v. *Herald Co.*, *supra*, I would deny the petition for a writ of habeas corpus without reaching the merits of the motion to proceed *in forma pauperis*. For the reasons stated above, I dissent from the Court's order directing the Clerk not to accept future petitions *in forma pauperis* for extraordinary writs from this petitioner.